Fairbury's First Consolidation with Cropsey

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The Prairie-Central school district is conducting a series of meetings with the public to determine the long-range plan for school facilities. The first major change in Fairbury schools was the consolidation with Cropsey in 1950, which occurred during an era of dramatic changes in the educational system.

As early as 1860, country schools were established to educate farm children in the Fairbury area. Farms were typically 80 to 160 acres, and farmers had many children to help on the farm. Country schools were established every two miles with the idea that a country student would not have to walk more than a mile to school. Eventually, Livingston County had a total of 299 country schools. These country schools were designed to accommodate about 20 students each.

With farm mechanization, less labor was required on area farms. As farms increased in size, fewer children were required to help on the farm. The number of rural students in 1897 in Livingston County was 6,000. By 1947, the number had decreased to 1,200. By 1947, on average, there were only four rural students per country school.

Between 1947 and 1950, almost all country schools in Livingston County were closed. The few remaining students went to school in the nearest town. The old country school buildings were sold at public auction.

In addition to closing country schools, many schools in small towns were too small in enrollment. During World War II, there was also a significant shortage of available teachers. Many men enlisted in the military or took higher-paying jobs in war production factories.

These issues became significant enough that the State of Illinois Legislature got involved. In 1943, the Illinois State Legislature passed a new law that worsened the teacher shortage. The new law changed the college requirement from 2 years to four years to earn a teaching certificate. Most Fairbury area teachers traditionally attended Illinois State Normal University for two years and got their teaching certificate.

In 1945, the State Legislature passed another law requiring each county to conduct a survey of its schools for reorganization. To comply with the new law, County School Superintendent Lucille Goodrich set up a committee to perform the study. Fairbury's representative on the survey committee was Elmer Bailey. The Livingston County survey report was completed and published on November 10, 1947.

Livingston, McLean, Ford, Logan, and Tazewell counties all received a "very inferior" rating from the State of Illinois.

As a result of the survey, many schools voted to consolidate. In 1946 and 1947, seventeen new school districts were created in Livingston County. Fairbury and Cropsey were not one of the seventeen new districts. State officials also recommended that Fairbury and Forrest consolidate.

In 1947, the Illinois State Legislature passed another education-related law, the New Community School District Act, which also impacted school consolidation decisions. For example, any new community school district had to have a minimum population of 2,000 residents.

These new state laws created a panic among small towns. Many towns scrambled to pursue consolidation with neighboring towns to meet the 2,000-resident requirement. Fairbury and Cropsey set up an election in May of 1948 for consolidation. This vote failed. Fairbury citizens voted 165 in favor and nine against. Cropsey residents voted 99 in favor and 152 against. By law, the proposition had to pass in both Fairbury and Cropsey.

After a series of lawsuits with Livingston County, a new consolidation vote between Fairbury and Cropsey was conducted on December 21, 1949. It rained heavily on voting day, and turnout was light. The voting results were that consolidation passed with 430 in favor and 120 against. Fairbury citizens voted 210 for and 38 against. Cropsey voted 153 yes and 30 no. Avoca Township voted nine yes and 29 no. Temple Country School voted 58 yes and 23 no.

The Fairbury-Cropsey District 3 would start operations in the Fall of 1950. Elections were held in January 1950 for the new school board members. In this election, the winners were Ben Zehr, Harold Elliott, Bernard Brucker, A. Keith Anderson, Vernon Stephens, James Goold, and John Householder.

The unsuccessful candidates for the school board were Herman J. Kilgus, Charles E. Schuler, Horace Goembel, Everett E. McCullough, and Erma Winslow.

In May 1949, the Cropsey senior class presented the last Cropsey high school play "Winning Schemers". Actors with the leading roles included Joyce Bachtold, Gwendolyn DeFries, and Gerald Barnes. The supporting cast members included Dale Scott, James Franklin, Charles Ward, Dorothy Steinlicht, Mary Convis, and Joan Elliott. The proceeds from the play financed the Senior graduation cruise to Mackinac Island, Sault Saint Marie.

The late 1940s were a tumultuous time for Fairbury and Cropsey residents. The country school system, which had worked well for more than 80 years, was abolished. The remaining school system was disrupted with the consolidation of Fairbury and Cropsey. Fortunately, all of the problems of consolidation were solved, and Fairbury-Cropsey District 3 was successful for many decades until it was consolidated into the Prairie Central school system.

FAIRBURY-CROPSEY HIGH SCHOOL

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